

Empathy: harriet beecher stowe's vital instrument

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When an author makes her work personal, it substantially enhances the audience's response. In the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author effectively exploits the use of empathy, in order to draw attention to the ills of slavery. This use of empathy can be seen in the author's characterization of female slaves and in the novel's various sentimental themes. These themes and the depiction of female slaves invoked significant emotion for the reader.

Due to Stowe's vast implementation of passion, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* received some criticism at the time of its publication. Harriet Beecher Stowe, through the application of sentimentalism, intended to amend the inhumane American attitude regarding slavery. Stowe's sympathetic characterization of Eliza Harris demonstrates her intentions of reforming the national mentality toward slavery. The author portrays Eliza as a passionate mother with devout Christian principles. Her faith and piety prove meaningless when her son is sold into slavery (Stowe 43). By illustrating Eliza's unjustified plight, Stowe empathetically appealed to American mothers.

The author's tragic vision for Eliza validates Stowe's use of compassion to ultimately inspire a societal transformation. The novel's theme of motherhood serves as a prime example of the author's purpose. Slavery, at the time of its existence, was a patriarchal institution ("Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture"). While men held dominant control of slavery, women possessed a profound influence over the institution. The author highlights this historical relationship between mothers and fathers in the novel, "If the mothers of the free states had all felt as they should, in times past, the sons of the free states would not have been the holders, and proverbially, the

hardest masters of slaves; the sons of the free states would not have connived at the extension of slavery” (Stowe 315).

Stowe, a mother herself, understood that mothers dictated the future of slavery by influencing their sons’ beliefs. She knew that if she empathized with American mothers, she could have indirectly rectified the succeeding generations’ view of slavery. The characterization of Cassy attributes to the novel’s empathetic purpose. Cassy is sexually abused, and the vices of slavery are directly pinned against her (Stowe 298). Through her character, Stowe aimed to villainize wretched slave owners, and strike an empathetic nerve with the audience.

Cassy’s character also speaks to the broader issue of sexual abuse within the context of slavery. Slave owners could rape their slaves without any legal repercussions, and Stowe wanted to vocalize this atrocity through Eliza (“Gender, Race, and Rape during the Civil War”). Ultimately, Cassy’s tragic character is established to make the reader feel compelled to change their views concerning both sexual abuse and slavery as a whole. Stowe implemented the compassionate theme of sacrifice to alter the national temperament regarding slavery. For example, Eliza’s struggle across the ice paints a particularly maudlin plea to the audience, “nerved with strength such as God gives only to the desperate, with one wild cry and a flying leap, she vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the shore, on to the raft of ice beyond. It was a desperate leap – impossible to anything but madness and despair With wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another and still another cake; –stumbling – leaping – slipping – springing upwards again! Her

shoes are gone – her stockings cut from her feet – while blood marked every step; but she saw nothing, felt nothing” (Stowe 51).

The author’s vivid description of Eliza’s sacrifice for her son creates a dramatic scene. This emotional appeal forces the reader to feel sympathy for Eliza, and challenges the status quo concerning slavery (“ Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture.”). Essentially, Stowe intended to correct national insolence toward an unjust institution by establishing an emotional theme of sacrifice. Within this plea for change, the author incorporated a religious theme to capture her audience emotionally and to alter the way her audience observed slavery.

At the time of the novel’s publication, the vast majority of Americans were practicing Christians (“ Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture.”).

Incorporating Christianity, when highlighting the iniquities of slavery, was relevant because Christianity was the driving force of American civilization and livelihood during the Civil War era. People were emotionally moved and captivated by the Christian religion. Stowe knew that if she conveyed proper theology, as opposed to the skewed southern approach to theology, it would make a significant impact on the way Americans collectively perceived slavery. The religious theme also consistently reflects Harriet Beecher Stowe’s upbringing, due to the fact her father was a prominent Presbyterian preacher (“ Beecher’s Family”).

Overall, Stowe intended to resonate with a predominately Christian audience to help bring about social and societal change. Uncle Tom’s Cabin was not well-received by all critics after its publication. In fact, poet Langston Hughes

considered the novel, “ the most cussed and discussed book of its time” (“ Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Matter of Influence”). Hughes knew that some critically-acclaimed authors, including George Orwell and Charles Dickens, doubted the novel’s literary merit and accused it of being overly sentimental (“ Charles Dickens’ Fraught Relationship with Harriet Beecher Stowe”). Hughes shared that belief and disliked the amount of literary praise Stowe received for the novel. Despite Hughes’ literary criticism, the novel is universally praised for its historical significance.

The author, through the use of sentiment and emotion, intended to improve the brutal American mentality of slavery. Stowe’s sensitive portrayal of Eliza Harris shows the author’s objective of restructuring the national sentiments concerning slavery. The author used the passion of motherhood as a theme to make a positive change. Cassy was utilized by the author to evoke the disgust of sexual abuse and slavery as a whole. Sacrifice was another empathetic theme mentioned in the novel with Eliza Harris at its forefront.

Stowe also integrated a religious theme to captivate her audience in an emotional manner. Despite its immense popularity and historical impact, the novel received some criticism from poet Langston Hughes. Ultimately, the effectiveness of Uncle Tom’s Cabin stemmed from the fact that Harriet Beecher Stowe was able to resonate with her audience on an emotional level. ? Works Cited Beck, Julie. “ Gender, Race, and Rape During the Civil War.

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